

## **MORE ON JOSEPH SLOPER**

Rosemary Smith

Over the last few years we have attracted quite a number of new members to the Society. Therefore I make no apology to the older members who may know everything which is in this next article. Earlier this year, MAURICE HARP sent me a photocopy of an article by **MICHAEL BAMENT** which had been published in *Cross Post Vol. 7 No. 4 Spring 1999*. I asked Maurice if he could obtain permission for me to use part of this article in our Bulletin. Maurice received Bament's permission and also the comments from *Cross Post* readers in their next two journals. The following is the main part of Michael Bament's perception of Sloper and perfin.

### **"Sloper's Patent and the Case for the Perfin."**

"There can't be many of us who haven't, at one time or another, slipped the odd personal letter through the company's postal system without asking permission. In most cases nowadays the bosses would turn a blind eye and cheerfully absorb the cost of the occasional postage stamp or meter frank as an acceptable part of the firm's annual overheads.

Such a tolerant attitude was not always the case and many instances have been recorded, particularly in Victorian times, where members of staff were prosecuted, and even imprisoned, for stealing postage stamps from their employers. Temptations then were very much greater than today - social conditions were of course very different - larger families, poor job prospects, low wages and very little if any by way of National Assistance except perhaps the dubious benefits of the Workhouse!

Prior to the introduction of the postal order on 1st January 1881, the postage stamp was a very useful and convenient form of negotiable currency and would commonly be used for making small remittances by post. At that time, mint stamps received in payment for goods could be converted into cash at any post office, subject to a discount of 2½% commission. In Victorian times there were probably very few employees stealing stamps to stick on their letters, but where firms received postage stamps in lieu of cash, a weak or dishonest employee might be tempted to steal stamps for trading in at the post office. Clearly something was needed to prevent both the regular pilfering of occasional stamps and the actions of those determined to steal them on a larger scale.

From 1867, a number of firms such as W.H.Smith & Sons, Copestake Moore Crampton & Co and Great Eastern Railway had official permission from the GPO to print their companies' initials on the backs of their stamps. This undoubtedly provided some deterrent to pilfering, but as soon as a stolen stamp was affixed to a letter, evidence of its theft was not readily apparent.

The answer to the problem was the PERFIN - **PER**forated with the firm's **I**Nitials - the method most commonly used - and approved by the GPO in March 1868. One man more than any other was responsible for developing and negotiating Post Office approval for this idea - Joseph Sloper.

Sloper, born about 1812, was a man of great energy and with a wide range of skills. He started in business in 1839 on the very threshold of the birth of the postage stamp. His first commercial venture was as a painter and decorator with premises in London's Oxford Street, but he later showed his genius for inventions of a mechanical nature. On 1<sup>st</sup> September 1958 Joseph Sloper was granted Letters Patent No. 1958 giving

him exclusive rights for a period of 14 years on an invention which almost ten years later came to be applied to the perforation of postage stamps with firm's initials. Approval to the perfin was given in writing by the GPO in a letter to Sloper dated 13 March 1868, albeit it was nearly a year later on 1st March 1869 before a notice appeared on page 22 of the Post Office Circular (Postmaster's edition) as:-

### ***POSTAGE STAMPS***

*In consequence of representations made to the Post Office by various Firms that there is reason to believe that their postage stamps are purloined by persons in their employ, the Department has recommended that the name or initials of Firms, etc, be either printed on the **back** of the stamps, or perforated through the stamps by means of a machine devised for the purpose, so that, inasmuch as the sale of such stamps would be thereby rendered difficult, the temptation to steal them might be lessened or altogether removed.*

*Postmasters will take care not to purchase any postage stamps thus marked which may be offered to them for sale.*

The final paragraph of this notice was of paramount importance. By removing the opportunity to sell the stolen stamps, the act of theft would also be removed.

One well-publicised case in which a shopkeeper received 7,820 stolen stamps took place in February 1868. John Howarth, of Cross Street, Manchester, was charged with receiving £35.19s.2d worth of unused stamps in payment for bread and cheese, he well knowing that the stamps had been stolen by errand-boys and junior clerks working in various Manchester offices. Howarth was later found guilty and imprisoned for a period of five years. Joseph Sloper was quick to take advantage of this unfortunate situation which was prominently reported in the *Manchester*

*Examiner* and other leading newspapers of the day. In an advertising circular from the National Postal Museum collection [also illustrated in Bulletin 272 (Oct'94) Page 13] which was sent by Sloper to a prospective customer, he added in manuscript, "*The Post Office has adopted my system for Money Orders etc.*". Original documents at Post Office Archives indicate that the manuscript additions are in Sloper's own hand.

One company that sought from the start to prevent fraud of this kind was the Great Western Railway. A letter dated 14 October 1869, written on their headed notepaper from the Accountants' Office at Paddington station is also in the Museum collection. The letter includes the statement..."*I beg to inform you that all Postage and Receipt stamps used in this Company's service are perforated "GWR" by Mr Sloper of Walbrook House E.C.* The letter goes on to say..."*/ may mention that Mr Sloper obtained the sanction of the Post Office authorities to use his invention before we entered into arrangements with him.* "

### **Full-name perforations**

It was not until 1873 that the Post Office became aware that a small number of firms were using 'full-name' dies to perforate their stamps. This was quite legal, as the original GPO notices of 1 March 1869 had recommended that "...*the name or initials of Firms etc be either printed on the back of the stamps or perforated through the stamps...* " In relation to the perfins, this was not however what the PO had really intended, and in 1873 they tried to restrict the perforation of stamps to a firm's initials only. Whilst the early perfins generally comply, with initials only, the Post Office failed in their attempts to suppress full-name perforations and in ensuing years a varied and interesting assortment of dies were brought into use. From the simple 'initials only' dies, the variety extends to

*J. J. Clutton Edge with Sloper's Complicity*

## Postage Stamps—Important Case.

The following extract was made from the "MANCHESTER EXAMINER" of 21st February, and appeared in other Provincial and London Papers:—



"CHARGE OF 'RECEIVING' 7,000 STAMPS.—At the Manchester Police-court on Wednesday *John Howarth*, provision-dealer, Cross-street, was charged with receiving, from errand-boys and junior clerks in various Manchester offices, a large number of stamps in payment for bread and cheese, he well knowing the said stamps to have been stolen. Inspector Shandley said he searched the prisoner's premises, and in a drawer he found 4,800 penny stamps, 810 twopenny stamps, and 2,210 receipt stamps; the total number being 7,820, and the value 35*l.* 1*9s.* 2*d.* The majority of them were new stamps—that is to say, they had not been stuck upon letters, but a certain portion of them—and these the officer found done up in a packet by themselves—had the appearance of having been fixed upon letters and taken off again, the edges being slightly jagged and the 'sticking stuff' looking not fresh. In fact, the charge against the prisoner originated in a letter being so tampered with. Mr. Slater, St. Ann's-square, suspecting something amiss in the posting of a letter containing two halves of 5*l.* notes—the letter not having been heard of—had asked Inspector Shandley to make inquiries. The result was that the errand boy confessed he had kept back the letter for the sake of the penny stamp (with which he bought a bun at the prisoner's shop), and when he found, on tearing the letter in two, that it was a money letter, he became frightened at what he had done, and he tucked the letter and the enclosed half notes between the bars of a 'grid' in Red Lion-street, where the officer found them. The stipendiary magistrate (Mr. Fowler) thought it a most important case, and he remanded the prisoner for a week to enable Inspector Shandley to make the most searching inquiry possible."

A plan has been devised in connection with "SLOPER'S PATENT PERFORATING SYSTEM" for *effectually* preventing the recurrence of such cases in future, and has been submitted to and allowed by the Post Office Authorities.

This plan, which has just been adopted by many of the most influential Firms and Public Companies in London, will be in full operation as soon as the Patentee has prepared his Machinery to meet the demands which he anticipates,

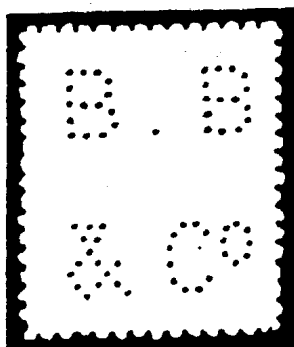
All applications addressed to—"THE MANAGER,

"Office for Sloper's Patent,

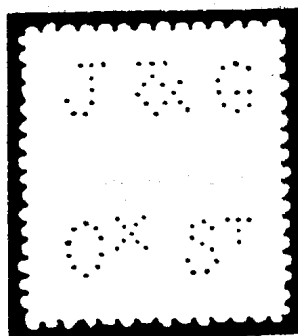
"WALBROOK HOUSE, WALBROOK, LONDON."

*The Post Office have adopted my system for money orders &c &c*

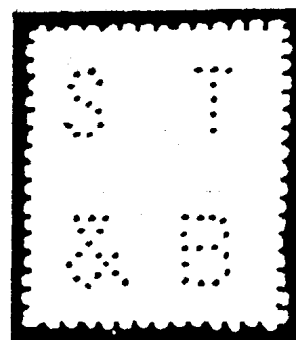
full-name dies, coats of arms, trademarks, monograms, numbers and geometric patterns - all of which retain the collective name of 'perfins'.



Baker Baker & Co., Bristol

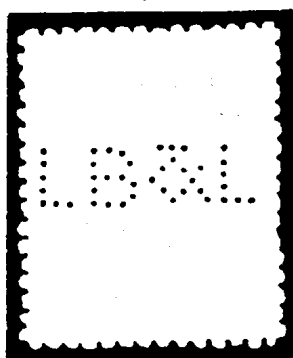


Jackson & Graham,  
Oxford Street, London

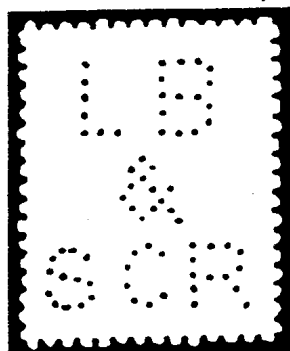


Spencer Turner &  
Boldero, London

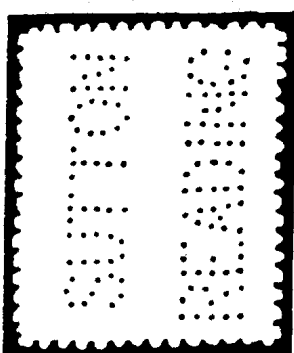
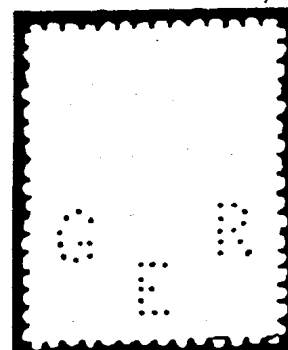
Lake Beaumont  
& Lake, London



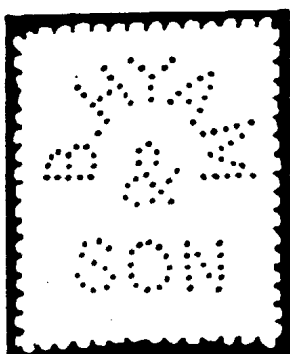
London Brighton &  
South Coast Railway



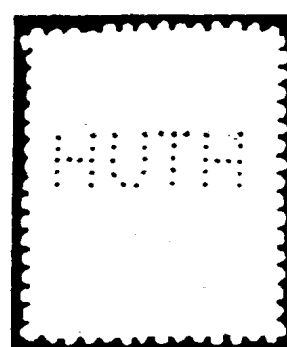
Great Eastern Railway



Sutton & Sons, Reading

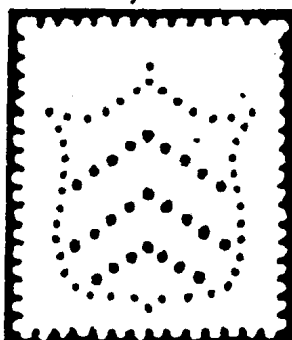


Benjamin Hyam  
& Son, London

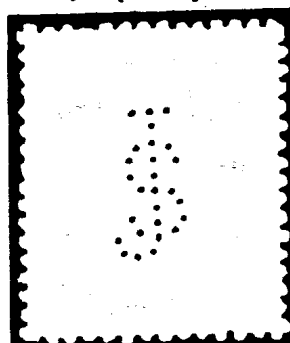


Frederick Huth  
& Co., London

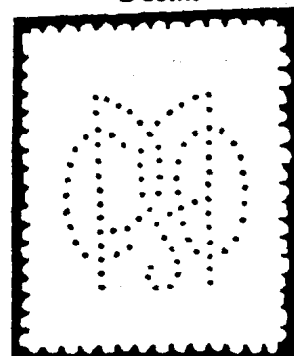
Coat of Arms –  
The City of Cardiff



Joseph Sloper



Patriotic Assurance Co.,  
Dublin



Joseph Sloper died in June 1890, but his invention is still applied to postage stamps, albeit the need nowadays hardly exists in relation to fraud and is largely addressed to the business of advertising. Since Sloper's first perfins of 130 years ago, there have been thousands of different types, the dies for which have been produced by many manufacturers since his original patent ran out in 1872. Merely a small sample of these fascinating stamps is shown on the following page.

Many businesses applied their own perfins to the sheets of stamps, having purchased the perforating machines from manufacturers such as Joseph Sloper. Sometimes, a member of staff might fold the sheet to speed up the perforating process and this would also account for a stamp perforated through the back. A variety of different combinations of adjoined perfins can occur if a sheet of stamps is folded more than once and such configurations are known to exist.

[There was a Fig. 8 which showed a strip 3 one penny lilacs on a cover to Winnipeg from London on March 2nd 1901. The caption stated that the perfin on the left-hand stamp is upside down and a mirror image of the other two, indicating that the stamp was taken from a sheet that had been 'perfinned' through the back.]

The acknowledgements at the end of this article read:- *"The study of perfins is the province of the Perfin Society of Great Britain, formed in 1957 and currently with a world-wide membership of over 350. In preparing this brief article, I gratefully acknowledge the help given by Terry Comper of that society and to THE HANDBOOK OF BRITISH PERFINS by JOHN S. NELSON. My thanks also to the staff of the Post Office Archives and Records Centre."*

In the next issue of *Cross Post - Vol. 8 No 1*, Mr Gerald Davies wrote in with the following comment:-

"...I enjoyed the excellent article by Michael Bament on Joseph Sloper and the 'Perfins'. But the caption to figure 8 mentioned: 'The perfin on the left-hand stamp...indicating that the stamp was taken from a sheet that had been 'perfinned' through the back.' I doubt if stamps were 'perfinned' in sheets, bearing in mind the machines used.

I have an envelope from the East Asiatic Company from Burma with four 'perfinned' stamps and as the holes in the picture are not very clear I add my description to make my point.

The 2 rupees has the EAC perforated normally, the 5 rupees is inverted, the 8 annas is reversed (a mirror image) on its side while the 6 pies has only the E and the A and such a small part of the C that anyone seeing it on its own, off cover, might not be able to interpret it.

The perforating die was clearly made for the high values. It was too big for the 6 pies, but were they punched in blocks of four stamps folded, which would account for the 'abnormals'? Anyway more than four stamps at one time would need quite a lot of power to punch.

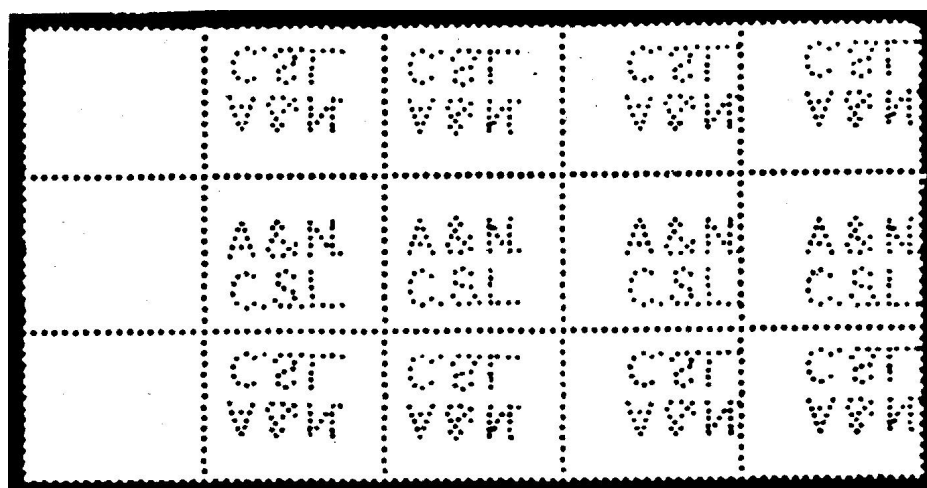
I 'wrote-up' this cover years ago, but now believe that all stamps were 'perfinned' one at a time and the operator (perfinner) never bothered whether the stamp was right way up, inverted, back to front or any way. After all, what mattered was the holes that protected each stamp."

In the next issue of *Cross Post, Vol.8 No.2*, Michael Bament states that since publication of his article and the postscript by Gerald Davies, more information came along. Bament then writes:



"On re-reading my article I can see how I gave the impression that stamps were 'perfinned' in complete sheets as a matter of course. This was not intended and I think a few words on the subject may be helpful.

I recently read an informative article by Rosemary Smith, Editor of the *Bulletin of the Perfin Society*, which perfectly illustrated the point I was trying to make about how and why some perfins appear as mirror images when perfinned from the back of the stamps. With the kind permission of the above society I reproduce an illustration of a block of 12 stamps [Ed:-See *Bulletin* 302 (Oct'99) Pg.16] perforated with the initials 'A&N/C.S.L.' (Army & Navy/Co-operative Society Ltd). In this instance, the block of stamps had been folded twice to produce a strip of three stamps thick prior to the 'perfin' process.



The middle row is a mirror image of the other two.

The piece is post-marked 18/9/1890 and the die appears to have been in use 1885-1895.

Roy Gault of The Perfin Society has been more than helpful in explaining single and multi-headed dies and describing the parameters of the machines that punched out these security perforations. I can do no better than quote directly from his letter to me on the subject, as follows.

*"The reality of the situation is that single-headed dies produce **one pattern** at a time whereas multiheaded dies create **more than one pattern** per operation of the perforating machine. Clearly, if in one go three strips of stamps are fed through a perforating machine fitted with a*

*single-headed die, then three stamps will be perforated at a time. Of course the stamps do not have to be in separate strips; they can be in blocks folded into strips (as with the block you want to illustrate) to produce strips three stamps thick.*

*The design of hand-operated presses is such that the back of the press usually prevents a sheet of stamps from being inserted too far, hence sheets are either broken up into strips or folded in such a way that the stamps can be 'initialled' with the minimum effort. Usually, small presses were fitted with single-headed dies and larger presses with multi-headed dies.*

*Another point to bear in mind is that Slopers either sold machines fitted with perforating dies to customers to initial their own postage stamps, or made dies to perforate stamps on behalf of customers. When Slopers perforated stamps for customers they took great care not to perforate the stamps 'upside down' or 'back to front'. On the other hand, 'customer' presses would have been operated by office juniors and the like who wouldn't have been too interested in keeping the stamps 'the right way up'.*

*For hand-operated presses, the stamps would usually have been torn into strips and fed through the perforating machine in two, three or four thicknesses of stamps all at one go. Of course, there was a finite limit to the 'gap' through which the stamps could be fed but the greater the thickness attempted, the greater the effort required to perforate the stamps. Hence some perfins show partial penetration giving rise to incomplete patterns. On occasions, due to the excessive pressure being applied, some pins became damaged and had to be removed, producing 'missing pin' variations. Sometimes a broken pin would be replaced.*

*To complicate matters, when Slopers produced multi-headed dies to perforate stamps on behalf of customers, the machinery used was such that the sheet could be passed completely under the perforating head. This did away with the time-consuming task of tearing the sheets into*

*strips prior to initialling and also made it easy to send the initialled sheets of stamps to the customer. Hence complete sheets of stamps could be initialled, albeit one row at a time, leaving the sheet intact. As you say, Slopers usually (but not always) made multi-headed dies with 12 patterns (i.e. 12x1) to initial stamps on behalf of customers, later reduced to 10x1 to deal with decimal sheets. They also made single-headed dies for initialling small volume orders or large format stamps.*

*I note that Gerald Davies believes that all stamps were 'perfinned' one at a time, but I fear he couldn't be further from the truth. As we've seen above, even with single-headed dies, multiple thicknesses of stamps would be initialled at the same time. However there is just one circumstance where only one stamp would be initialled at any one time and they would come from 'Initialling and Affixing' machines such as the POKO and Michelius affixers. In these cases, coils of stamps would be loaded into the machines and the stamps only initialled when the machine was cranked over and a stamp was affixed to a postal item. These two machines happened to use vertical delivery coils, but sideways delivery coil machines were also used. These, however, took pre-initialled coils - a job undertaken by Sloper using (usually) 6x1 multi-headed dies.*

*To finish off this business of single/multi-headed dies, I'm afraid we don't know yet what proportion of each existed. We 're still in the early stages of analysing the information we have to hand. What I do know is that 1x1, 2x1, 2x2, 3x2 and 6x1 are known configurations as well as the 10x1 and 12x1 mentioned above. The 12x5 is a bit of an exception! Incidentally, Slopers didn't always remove the last two patterns from their 12x1 multi-headed dies. I have examples showing the last two patterns perforating the selvage of decimal Machins. The Society also has proofs' taken from a number of Sloper 12x1 multi-headed dies in the mid 1990's showing all 12 patterns. New dies though, made after decimalization, would only have had 10x1 patterns. "*